The School

Kenneth Hopkins

THERE was no doubt but what THE SCHOOL was the biggest thing that had ever happened to Mill Township in general and to Millvale in particular since the day the first pioneer explorer had sauntered across the area from east to west making maps.

Of course, there had been the era of the mill from which both the township and the town had taken their names, but the mill had been only a good-sized barn down on the stream and had subsequently been left to decay with the advent of electrically powered mills in the nearby towns. It probably had not occurred to the townspeople of Millvale to rename the town and township following the demise of the mill. And even if it had, they would have been hard pressed to find a name, since the only thing in Millvale of any stature was THE SCHOOL, and no one had ever heard of a town and township named Schoolvale and School Township.

But for all the oddity, the name would have been quite appropriate, because ever since the middle nineties when THE SCHOOL had flung its red brick walls and its wood-slatted bell tower against the sky from the slight rise on Elm Street, and had dwarfed the surrounding houses and shop buildings, like the Gothic cathedrals which hovered over the little towns of Europe, there had been no serious challenge to its supremacy. Even after electricity had become rampant and had learned to thread its way through red neon tubes which had broken out in a rash all over the front of a big new tavern on Main Street, THE SCHOOL was still generally considered the more widely known landmark. Everything was still so many squares this way or that, and then to the right or left, from THE SCHOOL.

This difference between Millvale and its SCHOOL and the little continental towns and their cathedrals made it clear to everyone that Millvale, for all its seeming ruralness, was the well-adjusted product of a newer and more sanely proportioned order. Here the church had dissipated itself into little, short-spired, chapel-like structures of frame or brick, which looked up modestly from the various street corners of the town, to THE SCHOOL, which had assumed its rightful place against the sky.

The only concrete criticism that could possibly be levelled against this reversal of the old continental order of things might come from those who were aesthetically inspired by Gothic architecture, from which THE SCHOOL was a quite radical departure. But since neither Millvale nor Mill Township numbered among their people any who knew the difference between Gothic and non-Gothic architecture, and since the short passages concerning architecture in the reference books in Millvale's little library remained unread, this prob-

lem continued to solve itself, and THE SCHOOL'S place as the town's and township's gift to the world's most imposing structures went unquestioned. In place of the Gothic arch and the sweep of the flying buttress, THE SCHOOL offered the arch-eyed stare of round topped windows and the dull red monotony of brick walls.

But THE SCHOOL was big.

Probably, considering its three floors of high-ceilinged rooms, its added wing, and its gymnasium, it stood up well with the continental cathedrals per cubic foot of volume.

The old part of THE SCHOOL, now used for the grades, was a high three stories of red brick, gray-topped by a steep slate roof which was again topped by the slatted and decaying bell tower, which had housed the big bell until it was removed to dedicate a scrap drive in 1943. A flat, two-story wing had been joined onto the north side of the old building in the thirties to become the township high school. The wing extended almost to the street which crossed Elm on the north side of the school block and made no attempt at a compromise between the architecture of the nineties and that of the thirties.

Behind the old part of the building was the small, block-like structure of the central heating plant with its brick chimney which towered even higher than the slatted bell tower. And behind the heating plant and facing the street to the east of Elm was the gymnasium, a red brick rectangle with small windows tucked obscurely under the eaves of a flatly arched roof.

The high, old part of the building stared, arch-eyed and critical, west across Elm and on west across the block of houses and trees between Elm and Main and down into the gully made by Main Street running between Millvale's one block of business buildings. From the west bank of the gully the little stores, the State Bank, and the green-shuttered doctor's office looked meekly back east toward THE SCHOOL.

To the south and east and north, THE SCHOOL looked down on the houses of the town, interspersed with an occasional filling station, or a church, or a little grocery store that had strayed from the main business block in search of neighborhood customers. To the south along Main and Elm were the big houses, those of the store owners, the banker, and the owner of the automobile agency. To the east the houses gradually diminished into the little neat cottages geometrically laced up in little paved streets. Two blocks to the north of THE SCHOOL were the railroad tracks, and across the tracks the economic cycle was completed by the little shacks set among the winding half-streets of the north side.

But THE SCHOOL looked down no more critically to the north than to the south.

No one in Millvale or in Mill Township could have lived outside of a state of complete mental incompetence or of extreme infancy

and have remained unaware of the position of eminence which THE SCHOOL held over the local scene. THE SCHOOL was the organ through which the essence of the culture was perpetuated by being dispensed to one and all of the fledgling generation by means of a twelve-year (or longer, if necessary) program of contacts with bits of knowledge, with fellow students, and with a variety of teachers. And everybody knew it.

However, even though there was universal acceptance of THE SCHOOL, there was considerable variety in the reactions which THE SCHOOL caused in different individuals. To the little six-year-old who was suddenly taken for the first day from the quiet and simple life of the small farm on the edge of the township, THE SCHOOL was an ugly, noisy monster, reaching without end in all directions and upward. From the moment when he had first been forced from the yellow bus by the rush of the other children, who were nearly all in higher grades and quite old, and had found himself standing on the wide sidewalk looking up at the red brick walls which blotted out the sky, he felt that THE SCHOOL with its glassy eyes and cold redness did not, for all its size, hold any of the kindness and warmth of the little farmhouse or of the old wooden barn. This monster with its screaming hordes swirling frenziedly on all sides brought a feeling of horror and of panicky loneliness. Even when the first grade teacher, who looked a little bit like his grandmother, had taken him in tow and had led him up the steps and through the big arch of the doorway and through the big dim hall and into the big first grade room with its little desks and tables, he felt that he wanted to break away and run outside and try to find his way home along the miles of country roads that the yellow bus had covered on the way in. But he knew he would not run away. He knew, from everything he had heard since he had become old enough to understand, that all the six-year-olds in Mill Township went to THE SCHOOL, and even though he had not been warned of the awful loneliness and of the feeling of wanting to escape, he knew that it was more important that he should be like the other six-year-olds and stay at THE SCHOOL than that he should run away.

But there were many problems. The teacher seemed to know ahead of time that everything he would do, no matter how hard he tried, would be a mistake. But he was soon glad, through loneliness, that he had her for his teacher, not because she taught him things that he did not know, but because she was not deeply bothered by his mistakes. He did not understand the instructions about the colored pencils and the drawings, and the teacher did not seem able to see the green and yellow marks on the drawing paper as a picture of the big corn field just behind the barn lot at home. And just when he was getting used to the colored pencils and the drawing paper, he

was ordered away from them to a thing called recess, which he did not understand.

At the end of the recess, all of the boys of the first grade were taken back into the dim hall and a man teacher from one of the other rooms came and told them that whenever they had to, during the recesses or the lunch hour, the boys were to go to that little room down the hall because that little room was for boys, and that they were never to go to the little room the other way down the hall, no matter how much closer it might be, because the other little room was for girls. But after he got into the room, he found it was not a little room at all, but was big and high and had so much white porcelain that all he could do was stand in amazement and look at the sparkling porcelain until it was time to go back to the colored pencils and drawing paper. And as soon as he was back in the first grade room he wanted to go back to the porcelain thing again, and he had to squirm and twist through an almost endless session of drawings and picture samples before he got the next desperately needed chance. It became clear quite early that THE SCHOOL, big and great as it was, had a program that did not bother to meet small but strong urgencies.

But from the girl who came from the east side of town to lead the eighth grade in scholastic standing, even though her father was only a clerk in one of the grocery stores and had no connection other than a small-town speaking acquaintance with the school board, there came a quite different reaction. She loved THE SCHOOL. She loved the grades which, now that she was at the top, seemed to have become like children to her through the intimate contact of mastery. THE SCHOOL was rightfully the biggest thing in the community, and she, as the scholastic leader of her class, held the enjoyable position of leading the grades, which, after all, was an important part of THE SCHOOL.

And after the eighth grade she would go into the newer, two-story wing and lead her class through the four years of high school. And after that—but it was too painful to think about the time after high school and about leaving THE SCHOOL forever. She knew she was not pretty and, as a result, she had given up the idea of marriage as far back as the sixth grade and had substituted for it the goal of clinching the highest scholastic standing of whatever class she was in. But it had occurred to her recently that scholastic standing had one serious drawback when compared to marriage. High scholastic standing, in itself a victory, insured promotion from one grade to the next; but promotions, when it became evident that each one was a big step toward the final promotion and the end of scholastic standing, seemed to turn into partial defeats. Marriage, on the other hand, barring an unsuccessful one, seemed to represent an eternity of highly acceptable social standing, terminated only in death, which, if one were not the victim, still insured an acceptable social standing.

Well, maybe she would be lucky enough to go to college, where there would be more classes to lead; and if not, she might try her hand at a career even though the careers in Millvale seemed non-existent; and if all failed and she was left schoolless and without standing, there were always the onrushing locomotives on the railroad tracks. But she seldom thought about the time after high school. Much of her time was spent studying, and much of it looking lovingly and condescendingly down at the lower grades, and looking eagerly and receptively toward the high school.

THE SCHOOL was fine and great, and her standing was high in THE SCHOOL. And she, knowing that she was not pretty, was in love with THE SCHOOL.

To the boy in the freshman class of the high school whose father owned the automobile agency, THE SCHOOL represented a number of different opportunities. He was as good as any of those creeps working out for the freshman basketball team, and that practically assured him a starting place on next year's high school varsity. He was good enough for the first team right now if only that creep he had for a coach weren't too nearsighted to see his ability.

But what interested him more was the fact that next year he would be old enough to drive legally, and he was sure he could talk his father out of one of his used cars which he could rebuild into a hot rod. And in Millvale the popularity of the high school hot rodder was automatic. Already he knew of two or three guys who could be talked into picking him up an occasional half-pint from the tavern, and next year, when he would have his hot rod, he would not only have the liquor, but he could get some girls to help him drink it.

Considering everything, he was well pleased with things around THE SCHOOL. The outlook was satisfying and held considerable promise. Of course, he was not happy about THE SCHOOL academically, but then, every school had an academic aspect so he had decided to put up with it even though the classes never discussed anything that he did not already know about. And this fact caused him an occasional annoyance, because, already knowing, he felt that he was not obligated to study, and the result was that even though he knew all about the subject under discussion, he rarely had his knowledge organized into any presentable form when exams and questions came his way.

But aside from the classes, THE SCHOOL was a good source of contacts, and if the time between now and next year would just pass a little faster, he would be well satisfied with THE SCHOOL.

The girl, who for the last twelve years had come in from the big, white-buildinged farm two miles south on the north-south road, and who had made average grades, and who had had better than average luck in getting dates with the respectable sons of the respectable store owners, lived every moment of THE SCHOOL. And she was sure

that after graduation, when she would at last be bereft of THE SCHOOL, her social life, no longer being fed by THE SCHOOL, would die, and she would soon after die with it.

Centuries ago, when she was only four and five, she could remember that her social life had been only her parents and an occasional family of relatives who would stop in at the big farm for Sunday dinner. But when she was four and five she had not minded the isolation of the farm because she had had no social life with which to compare it. But she had come to THE SCHOOL, and THE SCHOOL had made her socially, and it was a dirty shame that THE SCHOOL could not go on forever for her and eliminate, with its daily contacts, the chilling possibility of an eternity of social entombment on the farm.

Of course, she could do like some of the girls did and maybe trap herself a husband, but the risk of social ostracism was too great, and anyway she was not sure that the isolation of the farm would be any worse than the isolation of the kitchen or the bedroom.

But THE SCHOOL would go on for months yet, and maybe something could be done. And if not, maybe she could become secretary of the class reunion committee and in that way keep up contact with the people of THE SCHOOL long after THE SCHOOL itself had turned her out.

Ah, graduation day would be a day of mourning, because after graduation THE SCHOOL would turn away from her and become a stranger.

To the members of the school board, THE SCHOOL was a magic word that insured a high community standing year in and year out. Most of the business men who were on the board were referred to in introductions, upon the rare occasions when introductions were needed, as "one of our leading grocers and member of the school board," or "our banker (usually, followed by a joke about embezzlement) and member of the school board." It was a title following the name and a short pause, like the MP in England, and was the signal for the extension of all possible consideration short of actual loss of profit.

To the merchants THE SCHOOL was a source of nickel and dime trade for the greater part of each year, trade from the outlying corners of the township, which might well, except for THE SCHOOL, have gone to the neighboring towns. And so the merchants were quite willing to buy an occasional pair of class play tickets and to set the art class's posters advertising the plays, which everyone knew about anyway, in their display windows along with the shirts and ties or the sweet potatoes and cucumbers.

Rarely a word of criticism, except in obvious jest, was directed toward THE SCHOOL. Of course, there were occasions upon which some of the boys, during fits of claustrophobia, entertained

brief visions of THE SCHOOL being consumed by flames; but these attacks of irrational behavior could usually be explained away by the fact that a new hunting season had just opened or that the fishing was exceptionally good down at the stream. In general, THE SCHOOL was regarded with no more dangerous attitudes than excessive community pride and complete faith in its ability to educate. This pride and this faith were deeply imbedded in the people of Millvale and Mill Township. But this was quite natural because, after all, THE SCHOOL was the biggest thing in town.

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EX NIHILO

John R. Foutty

The sun is bright but there are those
  Who would deny its light,
And turn their backs upon the day,
  To walk into the night.

The tavern doors are opened wide,
  A solace for their need,
And man can take the cup for bride
  To satisfy his greed.

The cup they lift and drink as if
  Each drink would be their last,
As if they could forget the fate
  Their Maker had forecast.

They laugh and soon forget their fear
  Within the dingy hall.
A shadow beckons but they turn
  To spurn its luted call.

The golden maidens dance and shout,
  Removing all from gloom;
They sway and flirt and twirl about
  As music fills the room.

But then at last the tune goes false
  And all the laughter fades,
For the dawn has crept upon them
  To bare their masquerades.

They stagger out into the dawn
  And feebly curse their plight.
They walk into the troubled day
  And wait again for night.